

Diamond Ranch Academy 1500 East 2700 South Hurricane, Utah 84737

July 28, 2005





Utah State Office of Education 250 East 500 South P.O. Box 144200 Salt Lake City, Utah 84114-4200

THE REPORT OF THE VISITING TEAM REVIEWING

Diamond Ranch Academy 1500 East 2700 South Hurricane, Utah 84737

July 28, 2005

UTAH STATE OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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State Superintendent of Public Instruction

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FOREWORD

The major purpose of the accreditation process is to stimulate school growth and improvement so as to increase student achievement.

In these efforts, the school staff makes a comprehensive evaluation of the school's programs, operations, and results. The school determines how actual practices align to stated objectives and resulting outcomes. It is a three-phased evaluation: (1) self-evaluation, (2) on-site evaluation by an external team of educators, and (3) implementation using units of the evaluation to improve the school by effecting thoughtful change.

The evaluation, July 28, 2005, was conducted because of the school's desire to ensure quality education for all students in the school, and to increase student achievement.

The entire staff of Diamond Ranch Academy is commended for the time and effort devoted to studying and evaluating the various facets of the total program and to preparing the materials used by the Visiting Team. The excellent leadership given by Bo Iverson, Education Director, is also commended.

The staff and administration are congratulated for their desire for excellence at Diamond Ranch Academy, and also for the professional attitude of all members of the group, which made it possible for them to see areas of weakness and strength and to suggest procedures for bringing about improvements.

While these recommendations may be used to solicit financial support to acquire some of the materials, equipment, and services needed to carry out a more effective program, it is even more important that the faculty and administration utilize them as they continue to evaluate and modify course offerings and administrative and classroom procedures to more dramatically increase student achievement at Diamond Ranch Academy.

Patti Harrington, Ed.D. State Superintendent of Public Instruction

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DIAMOND RANCH ACADEMY

Board and Administration

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Fotu Soliai	CSW	
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Stewart Squires		
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Jared Juett		
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Colby Neilson	Math, Science	
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Holly Nowers	Math, Life Skills	
Ashley Riddle	English, History	
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Herald Hinton (Consultant)	Librarian	
Support Staff		
Amity Hixson	SPED Para Pro	
Stefnee McMullin		
Mandy Hallam		
Mindy Rawlins		
Vanessa Rohbock		

DIAMOND RANCH ACADEMY

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of Diamond Ranch Academy is to create a nurturing environment where personal accountability will lead students towards academic achievement, emotional health, and a successful future.

BELIEF STATEMENTS

- We believe that each student is a valued individual with unique physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual needs
- We believe that everyone can learn, achieve and grow and personal accountability is essential to academic achievement and personal growth.
- We believe that as teachers assist students in becoming independent learners, students acquire skills that will affect every aspect of their future lives.
- We believe that student-paced study allows for each student, no matter the learning level, the ability to maintain a pace of subject mastery that is unique to their own individual needs.
- We believe that emotional health is key to academic success.

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Ralph P. Vander Heide, Ph.D., Consultant in School Accreditation, Visiting Team Chairperson

Judith H. Vander Heide, M.S., Consultant in School Accreditation

VISITING TEAM REPORT

DIAMOND RANCH ACADEMY

CHAPTER 1: SCHOOL PROFILE

Diamond Ranch Academy is a 200-acre ranch five miles southeast of Hurricane, Utah; an hour and a half from Lake Powell, the Grand Canyon, Las Vegas, and Bryce Canyon; and ten minutes from Zion National Park. The school is located in Utah's famous "painted desert." The self-study points out that this peaceful and serene setting lends itself perfectly to reflecting on one's life and actions. Students can improve behaviorally and grow academically in the mild climate with its spectacular scenery.

The school was founded by Rob and Sherri Dias in Idaho six years ago. They moved it to Utah in 2001. It is licensed as both a wilderness and a residential program.

Diamond Ranch Academy embraces the philosophy that there are no "bad" youths. While it is clear that there are many young people who make bad decisions, the school believes they are basically good people making bad choices, and they can be helped. The concept of the Real Life Transition ProgramTM grew from this philosophy.

Troubled teens often have difficulty connecting consequences to their actions. The school's Real Life Transitional SystemTM allows teens to live in an environment where they can fully reap all the good or bad consequences of their actions. In a gentle yet firm manner, teens are taught that in real life, there are always naturally occurring consequences for their choices.

It is within this environment that teens learn "real-life" lessons and skills, such as applying for a job, the importance of work and effort, money management, self-care, communication, consistency, anger management, and the ability to take responsibility and accountability for personal actions. School personnel claim that the program is especially effective with ADD/ADHD teens lacking impulse control and the ability to stay on task. The focus is on creating real-life situations in a structured setting to help teens realize how the decision-making process works.

This program is designed to shape behavior without anger, without violence, and without coercion. Bad choices (and thus negative consequences) slowly and naturally give way to good choices (and thus the reward). Teens are quick to learn that when they make good choices, good things happen. This behavior is encouraged and rewarded until it becomes an integral part of the individual. The aim is to internalize this pattern of life.

a) What significant findings were revealed by the school's analysis of its profile?

The school discovered significant findings about each student, since each is carefully profiled in order to individualize instruction to the extent possible and help students with their psychological and behavioral issues. The Visiting Team notes that Diamond Ranch adequately portrays the school population, environment, curriculum, and other relevant information about the school, with emphasis on its mission, philosophy, and educational and rehabilitative direction for each student.

The school's analysis of the profile includes the identification of its strengths and limitations, and for the most part it provides a description of the "big picture" about the performance of the school. Profile information was used in drafting the school's improvement plan.

The Visiting Team notes that in preparing the profile the school followed the guidelines of the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) and the NSSE handbook, *School Improvement: Focusing on Student Performance*, as well as the Utah accreditation handbook, *Collaborating for Student Achievement*.

b) What modifications to the school profile should the school consider for the future?

The Visiting Team commends the profile information that is given. However, more could be done with follow-up studies of students who have completed the program.

The school is reminded to continue to put its best foot forward and to profile thoroughly.

CHAPTER 2: THE SELF-STUDY PROCESS

a) To what extent has the school community engaged in a collaborative self-study process on behalf of students?

The faculty and staff at Diamond Ranch Academy believe parents are an integral part of the program and an essential element of the therapeutic process.

The Visiting Team had a very productive meeting with most of the management staff, owners, and therapists, as well as a teacher (other teachers were interviewed later). The complete cooperation and commitment of all is commendable.

b) To what extent does the school's self-study accurately reflect the school's current strengths and limitations?

This has been described in Chapter 1 above. Strengths and limitations are frankly addressed in the self-study, with indications for improvement in some areas. This process for improvement is aligned with the DRSLs.

CHAPTER 3: INSTRUCTIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Diamond Ranch Academy's desired results for student learning (DRSLs) are as follows:

- Students will become independent learners and will be ready to enter another school at grade level, begin college or start a career.
- Students will be responsible for their actions and take ownership for their behavior.
- Students with special needs will demonstrate progress towards objectives and benchmarks as outlined in students' IEP Services Plan.

School staff members engaged in a thorough procedure for determining the DRSLs. The staff and SIP team used the "Survey of Goals for Student Learning" published by the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE), as well as observation of student achievement and educational research, to determine the learning needs of students.

The Visiting Team observed that several indicators of student achievement are given for each DRSL so that progress can be measured. Action steps are clearly outlined in the plans for achieving the DRSLs. For example, an action step for the third DRSL is to "identify incoming students with special needs." The evaluation indicators for this DRSL include "identify student classification" and "teacher observation."

Shared Vision, Beliefs, Mission, and Goals:

- a) To what extent did the school facilitate a collaborative process to build a shared vision for the school (mission) that defines a compelling purpose and direction for the school?
 - Again, Diamond Ranch Academy is to be commended for its collaborative effort, working with unity to improve academic excellence. Stakeholders met regularly as part of the self-study process. The beliefs, mission, and DRSLs were a result of the collaborative approach. The mission statement does indeed describe a compelling purpose and direction for the school.
- b) To what extent has the school defined a set of beliefs that reflect the commitment of the administration and staff to support student achievement and success?
 - This has been well accomplished (see the list of beliefs at the beginning of this report). The school beliefs address key issues pertinent to effective decision making and policy development. It appears that the implications of the school's belief

statements and the level of the school's conviction to act upon the beliefs were considered prior to finalizing the list of beliefs.

c) To what extent do the school's mission and beliefs align to support the school's desired results for student learning (DRSLs)?

The mission, beliefs, and DRSLs align as recommended by NSSE. The Visiting Team observed that the analysis of students' learning needs takes into account the profile data and related assessment and evaluation measures of student learning. The expectations for student learning reflect meaningful and appropriately challenging goals. They are free of jargon, and all stakeholders can understand the clear and concise language.

Curriculum Development:

a) To what extent does the staff work collaboratively to ensure the curriculum is based on clearly defined standards and the Utah Core Curriculum (with inclusion of the Utah Life Skills)?

The curriculum is based on the Utah Core, and teachers work together to meet and modify the core as needed for the school's unique population. The Utah Life Skills are a part of the curriculum. Standards for appropriate learning for the varying abilities guide the development of curriculum.

b) To what extent does the teaching staff work collaboratively to support the development of a curriculum that focuses on the school's desired results for student learning?

See above. All faculty members concur in focusing on the school-wide DRSLs as part of their teaching assignment, and the Visiting Team observed that therapists and other non-teaching personnel also work to achieve the DRSLs.

Quality Instructional Design:

a) To what extent does the professional staff design and implement a variety of learning experiences that actively engage students?

Teachers have learned that they must be creative and innovative with this student population, and help with the rehabilitation of students as well as their academic needs. Teachers are very much aware that instructional time must be protected and appropriately allocated to support learning. The Visiting Team encourages the teaching staff to continue and improve this endeavor.

Every effort should be made to accomplish more direct teaching. Teachers should seek to better assist each student in the self-directed programs. The Visiting Team recognizes that some rather large classes make this difficult.

b) To what extent do the professional staff and leadership provide additional opportunities which support student learning?

The students engage in appropriate "additional opportunities" such as sports and community service, as well as activities that directly support the curriculum. The school provides opportunities for students to improve and enrich their learning through expanded use of time, facilities, and instructional resources.

Quality Assessment Systems:

a) To what extent has the staff developed classroom or school wide assessments based on clearly articulated expectations for student achievement?

The development of assessments of student learning is based on a definition of the type of achievement to be assessed and the performance standards for evaluating the quality of students' achievement. Assessment is both formative and summative. It appeared to the Visiting Team that assessments are fair and equitable. Teachers attempt to individualize assessment. There is much ongoing, one-on-one behavioral assessment of students at Diamond Ranch Academy. However, the Visiting Team recommends that all academic assessment be analyzed in order to improve variety and individualization.

Leadership for School Improvement:

a) To what extent does the school leadership promote quality instruction by fostering an academic learning climate and actively supporting teaching and learning?

The educational director is a competent and energetic educational leader who understands the importance of promoting and fostering quality instruction as well as rehabilitation of the students at Diamond Ranch Academy. He encourages decision making that is data-driven, research-based and individualized. He, along with other administrators (see the list at the front of this report), provides skillful stewardship by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources of the school for a safe, efficient and effective learning environment. He consistently monitors the work of the teachers and checks on the progress of the students.

The school leadership promotes quality instruction by fostering an academic learning climate and actively supporting teaching and learning.

Community Building:

- a) To what extent does the school foster community building and working relationships within the school?
 - As noted throughout this report, community building is part of the ethos of the school. Positive and productive working relationships are established among students, teachers, support staff, and administrators.
- b) To what extent does the school extend the school community through collaborative networks that support student learning?

The school participates in community projects and service learning, which is an integral part of the program. However, the school is located in a remote area; there is no daily contact with the local communities. Local communities do not "sponsor" activities at Diamond Ranch Academy.

Culture of Continuous Improvement and Learning:

- a) To what extent does the school build skills and the capacity for improvement through comprehensive and ongoing professional development programs focused on the school's goals for improvement?
 - Professional development is conducted as need is perceived and funds allow.
- b) To what extent does the school create conditions that support productive change and continuous improvement?
 - The school is committed to progressive change. Of course, a principle concern is first to help these youngsters with their personal problems in order that they may better achieve academically.

CHAPTER 4: NORTHWEST ASSOCIATION OF ACCREDITED SCHOOLS (NAAS) STANDARDS I-XI

Standard I – Educational Program

Diamond Ranch Academy meets all four sections of this standard. The educational program is aligned with the mission statement and beliefs. The Visiting Team observed that the vision for the school has been collaboratively developed. The instructional and organizational practices, as well as the policies and procedures, support the desired results for student learning and prepare students to succeed in a

culturally diverse, democratic society. The program of studies meets the requirements of the state.

Standard II – Student Personnel Services

All three sections of this standard are met. Personnel services are designed to give appropriate systematic assistance to students as called for in the subsections of the requirements. The assigned personnel for guidance includes a minimum of one full-time person for each 400 students enrolled. The primary objective of the counseling program is to promote and enhance the academic and personal development of students and to prepare them for post-high school experiences. Several therapists participate in the counseling.

Standard III - School Plant and Equipment

This standard is met. The school plant provides for a variety of instructional activities and programs and incorporates aesthetic features that contribute to a positive educational atmosphere. It provides for the health and safety of students and all school faculty and personnel. The Visiting Team has visited this school on three previous occasions; each time, improvements have been made. The change during the last three years is truly remarkable.

Standard IV - Library Media Program

The school meets this standard. The school library is a resource for literacy, information, and curriculum support. It contributes to the achievement of the DRSLs. A certified library media teacher (part-time consultant) provides assistance to the school. Sufficient funds are provided each year to meet the library/media needs of students and teachers. Significant progress has been made to date on upgrading the library. The Visiting Team observed that stakeholders are aware that ongoing upgrading should continue.

Standard V – Records

This standard is met. Student records are maintained, handled, and protected in the best interests of students and parents. Students and parents have the right to access personal student records and are ensured the privacy of such, as guaranteed by federal legislation.

Standard VI – School Improvement (This is addressed in the self-study.)

The five sections of this standard are met. The school improvement plan focuses on the total school rather than each of the separate components within the school. Systematic analysis of data regarding the performance of students has been incorporated into the comprehensive school improvement process, as has ongoing

examination of instructional practices. The plan is updated and adjusted each year in alignment with perceived needs.

Standard VII – Preparation of Personnel

This standard is met. All professional personnel are in compliance with the licensing requirements of the state of Utah and are endorsed or properly (temporarily) exempted for the subjects they are teaching.

Standard VIII - Administration

This standard is met. The administration of Diamond Ranch provides excellent educational leadership, supervises and coordinates programs, and carries out the necessary and required administrative procedures.

Standard IX - Teacher Load

This standard is met. The total number of students instructed by any one teacher in any one grading period does not exceed numbers set by the Utah State Office of Education and/or NAAS.

Standard X – Activities

This standard is met. The school supports activities that supplement and augment the basic instructional program by providing additional enriching experiences for students consistent with the school's mission and beliefs. Attention is paid to providing equal opportunities.

Standard XI – Business Practices

This standard is met. The school is financially responsible. Proper budgetary procedures and generally accepted accounting principles are followed for all school funds. The school's advertising and promotional literature are completely truthful and ethical.

CHAPTER 5: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS – ACTION PLAN

a) To what extent is the school-wide action plan adequate in addressing the critical areas for follow-up?

The plan appears to be adequate and understood by all stakeholders. There is school-wide commitment to the action plan, and follow-up procedures are sound. The Visiting Team assumes that the plan will achieve the desired outcomes. School

personnel intend to change and modify it as needed. How the action plan directly aligns with the DRSLs is clarified. The NSSE handbook was consulted as a model for formatting and for an excellent explanation of "alignment."

The recommended format followed by the school is to have complete alignment (profiling—establishing beliefs—mission statement derived from beliefs—analysis of how the school is operating—establishment of DRSLs based on profiling, mission and beliefs—an action plan that addresses the DRSLs).

CHAPTER 6: MAJOR COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Commendations:

- The Visiting Team commends all personnel and students for their hospitality and cooperation with the Visiting Team.
- The Visiting Team commends all personnel for their honesty concerning the academic programs at Diamond Ranch and for their willingness to improve.
- The Visiting Team commends all school personnel for their enthusiasm and apparent devotion to improving the lives of the students (i.e., for their commitment to the mission statement and beliefs).
- The Visiting Team commends the observable commitment of all personnel to the "real-life transitions program."
- The Visiting Team commends the administration, therapists, and faculty for the practice of holding regular meetings to discuss all aspects of the ongoing program of the school.
 - The Visiting Team commends all school personnel for their effort to design IEPs for the students and for fostering a nurturing but goal-directed atmosphere.
- The Visiting Team commends school personnel for providing some opportunities in service learning.

Recommendations:

• The Visiting Team recommends that the school initiate better follow-up studies on students who complete their stay at Diamond Ranch Academy.

- The Visiting Team recommends that some additional information be added to the profile, such as the types of families the students typically come from.
- The Visiting Team recommends that all stakeholders participate in continuing to upgrade the library.
- The Visiting Team recommends that all stakeholders work to use more direct teaching. (Some large classes make this difficult.)

Lastly, the school is reminded that accreditation provides reasonable assurance about the quality of opportunities available to students who attend the school. A primary purpose of accreditation is to protect the public trust. Accreditation promotes voluntary self-regulation, and is a means of showing confidence in a school's performance (i.e., showing that both quantitative and qualitative standards have been established). An ultimate objective of the self-study and accreditation process should be that schools institutionalize the process of reflective inquiry and thereby become internally responsible for the maintenance of standards—even the creation of standards. The Visiting Team anticipates that Diamond Ranch Academy will continue the process of self-evaluation and ongoing improvement.